


MISSISSIPPI'S HOPE BLUEPRINT

FOR CHILDREN & FAMILIES



A PROJECT
OF THE
MISSISSIPPI COMMISSION ON CHILDREN'S JUSTICE



"Hope is the belief that our future can be better than our past, and that we have a role to play in making that future a reality." – Dr. Chan Hellman, PhD, University of Oklahoma¹



MISSISSIPPI COMMISSION ON CHILDREN'S JUSTICE
Mississippi Supreme Court
450 High Street, Jackson, MS 39201

Dear Mississippi families and those who serve them,

We are in the middle of a very exciting time for Mississippi's history—particularly regarding the state's child welfare system. Mississippi is seeing remarkable decreases of children in state custody as well as an uptick in collaboration across sectors. Nearly everyone leading these agencies and efforts are working together with a renewed sense of excitement.

And one thing is responsible for it: **hope**.

Over the past two years, members of the state's Commission on Children's Justice have explored research on hope theory and its applications to heal trauma and improve wellbeing of children and families. The Commission has put together this living document to serve as a call to action to keep hope theory front and center in our work. We also hope that this document serves to unify citizens, state and local leaders, and system stakeholders in Mississippi's shared desire to uplift children, youth, and families. This document will be updated regularly with new research, goals, and state-specific data.

We want this document to encourage you as much as it is used as a compass for vision and strategy among those at the table.

Sincerely,

*Justice Dawn Beam
Mississippi Supreme Court
Commission Co-Chair
Programs of Hope Co-Chair*

*Judge Thomas Broome
Rankin County Judge
Commission Co-Chair*

*Judge Rhea Sheldon
Chancellor, 10th District
Commission Co-Chair*

*First Lady Elee Reeves
Office of the Governor
Programs of Hope Co-Chair*

*Commissioner Taylor Cheeseman
MS Dept. of Child Protection Services*

*Director Bob Anderson
MS Dept. of Human Services*

¹ Chan Hellman, "Hope as A Light in the Darkness During Transitions", 2020.

Introduction

Mississippi today is more hopeful. Due to efforts by government and private community partners, Mississippi has achieved a notable – and safe – reduction of the number of children in its foster care system over recent years. On March 31, 2017, there were 5,986 children in foster care, the most since 2003 (which is earliest data available). On October 1, 2020, there were 3,941 children in foster care (which is the most recent data available). That decrease represents a 34% reduction in the number of children in foster care in 2.5 years and far outpaces the national trend.² More of Mississippi's children are safe and living with their families.

These outcomes are the result of leadership within the collection of agencies and organizations who serve Mississippi families, including the Mississippi Department of Child Protective Services, Mississippi Supreme Court, Mississippi Administrative Office of the Courts, Mississippi Department of Human Services, along with their community partners. Leaders across these stakeholder groups recognize change is needed and have boldly considered sound strategies that focus practice on preventing abuse and neglect, avoiding unnecessary disruption of families and system-induced trauma, pursuing safe and lasting permanent family connections, and ensuring Mississippi's children live healthy, supported, and productive lives. Effective collaborations have energized this outcome by increasing service capacity, identifying resource gaps, addressing barriers to accessing services, and creating new pathways and connections that facilitate a coordinated continuum of care. These collaborative efforts have improved outcomes for children and families. Moreover, the lessons learned from cross-sector, local and state collaborations set a direction for continued efforts to promote even more hope for Mississippi's families and communities. This Blueprint seeks to clarify and prioritize what Mississippians hope for and commit to concerning the well-being of vulnerable children, youth, and families. It is a call to continue moving beyond fragmented approaches by developing broader partnerships, setting attainable goals, employing data driven decision-making, and engaging in bolder strategies. And it is an invitation to all citizens, leaders, agencies, organizations, and institutions throughout the state to join in a campaign of hope.

The Charge for System Change

Common values, shared vision, and aligned strategies have, in certain ways, created a child welfare system that maximizes and sustains positive impact for children, youth, and families throughout Mississippi. Recent system gains are worthy of celebration, but much work remains to be done. The record decrease in the state's foster care population can be understood in part as a correction for past over-utilization.³ Sustaining the current direction will require significant

² (Casey Family Programs to provide citations)

³ MDCPS Data, October 1, 2020

intentional effort, leadership, innovation, and locally-targeted strategies. Even in counties with the highest safe reduction rates, removal and in-care rates remain high.⁴ Moreover, some counties continue to experience *growth* in foster care.⁵ As has historically been true, most removals of children to foster care are for reasons of neglect (69%), not more serious accounts of abuse.⁶ These dynamics invite examination of whether resources are being focused on the greatest safety concerns and what options might exist to address the needs of families in more effective ways. A growing understanding of the effects of trauma on child development and the effects of unresolved trauma on parenting provides context for more effective prevention and intervention strategies. Leadership and members of the Commission on Children's Justice (CCJ) are committed to improvement efforts that include trauma-informed and hope-focused approaches to system-change and to addressing the impact of government actions on children who are abused or neglected.

A Hopeful Direction

What is already known is that the impact of the trauma on children from experiences of abuse, neglect, and family separation lasts a lifetime. This realization has fueled a focus on childhood trauma, often referred to as adverse childhood experiences, as a significant public health concern.⁷ The Hope Research Center at the University of Oklahoma at Tulsa studies and promotes the science and power of hope as a buffer against the stress and adversity caused by trauma. Researchers are producing data and building community capacity using hope as the theory of change. The CCJ and MDCPS have partnered with Dr. Chan Hellman, founder of the Hope Research Center, to design and implement a direction of hope for Mississippi's youth courts and child welfare system. Other agencies and providers recognize the power of hope and are excited to consider opportunities for the application of hope science across multiple disciplines.

The hope theory centers on the relationship between a person's willpower (or agency) and his or her "way power" (or pathways) enabling the achievement of a desired goal. A person with hope can find new pathways to a goal when an impediment is encountered; a person without hope is unable to forge new pathways.

The CCJ and its members have enjoyed some success at creating pathways of hope through collaborative approaches that have catalyzed improvement in the state's child welfare system. Examples include two signature efforts of recent years: to expand and improve legal

⁴ (Casey Family Programs to provide citations)

⁵ (Casey Family Programs to provide citations)

⁶ (Casey Family Programs to provide citations)

⁷ Center for Disease Control, November 2019 publication: <https://www.cdc.gov/vitalsigns/aces/index.html>

representation for parents in civil child abuse and neglect cases and Mississippi Programs of Hope that worked to strength family resource collaborations within eight pilot counties.

Next Steps: Moving the Needle on System Change

Based on recent successes and learnings, the CCJ reaffirms its commitment to children and families by identifying areas needing improvement, making recommendations for improvement, and working together to implement recommended reforms. In that spirit of hope, this Blueprint embraces the following Operating Principles:⁸

- Commitment to long-term, multi-year collaborations, because long-term change takes time, to sustain directional and system change.
- Engagement of constituent voices and community members as substantive partners in equitable ranking with state-level key stakeholders across sectors, including individual youth, parents, and caregivers with lived experience, decisionmakers from government, business and nonprofits.
- Use and creation of shared data to set the agenda and guide collaborative decision-making in an improvement direction over time.

Conclusion

This document puts forth a common agenda for all family and child agencies and service providers to build upon – an agenda focused on creating hope, for the short and long-term, through collaborative efforts that use data and research and that reflect the experiences of those children and families who have been involved with the child welfare system. It is a living document and serves to inform and strengthen practices and policies.

Following this Blueprint, members of the CCJ are pursuing proven strategies for systemic change and reimagining youth courts and foster care as supports for families. Members are working diligently to identify and implement changes that reduce trauma and move parents and children from system scrutiny toward support and stability. Together, through this common agenda, we can create system change that provides hope and opportunity for a brighter future for all Mississippi families.

⁸ Adapted from The Bridgespan Group, *Needle-Moving Community Collaboratives: A Promising Approach to Addressing America's Biggest Challenges*, <https://www.bridgespan.org/insights/initiatives/transformative-scale/needle-moving-community-collaborative-s-a-promisin>.

APPENDIX A

Serial: **222631****IN THE SUPREME COURT OF MISSISSIPPI**

No. 89-R-99037-SCT

***IN RE: COMMISSION ON CHILDREN'S
JUSTICE*****FILED****FEB 14 2019**OFFICE OF THE CLERK
SUPREME COURT
COURT OF APPEALS**EN BANC ORDER**

Before this Court en banc is the matter of children's justice in the State of Mississippi. This Court receives an annual federal Court Improvement Plan Grant, earmarked for the improvement of Mississippi's Youth Court system. A requirement for the receipt of the funds is that an advisory group be utilized to assist in the identification of areas needing improvement in the children's justice issues, as well as making recommendations for improvement of those areas and monitoring the implementation of the recommended reforms.

IT IS THEREFORE ORDERED:

1. The Court hereby charges the Commission on Children's Justice with developing a statewide comprehensive approach to identify areas needing improvement in children's justice issues, as well as making recommendations for improvement of those areas and monitoring the implementation of the recommended reforms.

2. The following are selected as members of the Commission, subject to their agreement to serve:

Justice Dawn H. Beam, Associate Justice, Supreme Court of Mississippi;

Judge Latrice Westbrook, Mississippi Court of Appeals;

Judge Tom Broome, County Court Judge, Rankin County;

Judge Rhea Sheldon, Chancery Judge 10th District

Randy G. Pierce, Executive Director of the Mississippi Judicial College;

David Calder, Director of Children's Advocacy Clinic, University of Mississippi Law School;

Shirley Kennedy, Director of Children's Advocacy Program, Mississippi College School of Law;

Dr. Scott Benton, Professor of Pediatrics, Director, Division of Forensic Medicine, Medical Director, Children's Safe Center, University of Mississippi Medical Center;

Dr. Beverly Bryant, Chair, Department of Child Psychology, University of Mississippi Medical Center;

Angela Robertson, Associate Director and Research Professor, Social Science Research Center, Mississippi State University;

Dr. Lisa Nored, Chair, Department of Criminal Justice, University of Southern Mississippi;

Paula Broome, Bureau Chief, Bureau of Victims Assistance, Mississippi Office of the Attorney General;

Patti Marshall, Bureau of Victims Assistance, Special Assistant Attorney General, Mississippi Office of the Attorney General;

Sandra Parks, Bureau Chief, Children's Division of Mississippi Department of Mental Health;

Craig Robertson, Co-Founder of 200 Million Flowers;

Amy Wilson, Executive Director, CASA Mississippi;

John Davis, Executive Director, Mississippi Department of Human Services;

Jess H. Dickinson, Commissioner, Department of Child Protection Services;

Lyndsy Irwin, Director of Child Support Enforcement, Mississippi Department of Human Services;

Toni Kersh, Bureau Director, Office of Compulsory School Attendance Enforcement, Mississippi Department of Education;

James Maccarone, Director, Division of Youth Services, Mississippi Department of Human Services;

Michael McPhail, Retired, County Court and Youth Court Judge, Forrest County;

Judge Sharon Sigalas, County Court and Youth Court Judge, Jackson County;

Judge Vel Young-Graham, County Court and Youth Court Judge, Lauderdale County;

Chancellor Jacqueline Mask, Chancellor of the First Chancery District of Mississippi;

Judge Kevin Briscoe, Chief Justice, Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians;

Judge Holly Denson, Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians;

Ginger Mathis Miller, County Attorney, Tate County;

Karla Tye, Executive Director, Mississippi Children's Advocacy Centers;

Devin Loggins, President and Chief Executive Officer, Mississippi United Methodist Children's Homes;

John Damon, Director, Canopy Children's Solutions;

Angelique C. White, Guardian Ad Litem, Gulfport, Mississippi;

Nicole McLaughlin, Executive Director of the Access to Justice Commission and Director of MS Bar's Access to Justice Initiative;

Andre deGruy, Office of the State Public Defender;

Judge John Hudson, Jurist in Residence, Mississippi Supreme Court.

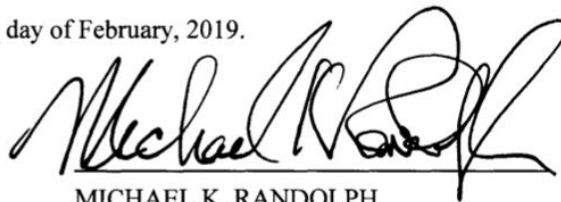
3. In undertaking its tasks, the Commission shall review such reports, studies, and materials as it deems appropriate, study legislation, analyze the use of court improvement

funds, and submit recommendations to the En Banc Conference of the Mississippi Supreme Court for any necessary changes to improve the court systems for children.

4. Justice Dawn Beam, Judge Rhea Sheldon and Judge Thomas Broome are appointed Co-Chairs.

5. The Clerk of the Supreme Court shall spread this order upon the minutes of the Court and transmit a true copy to each appointee.

SO ORDERED, this the 11 day of February, 2019.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Michael K. Randolph", written over a horizontal line.

MICHAEL K. RANDOLPH
CHIEF JUSTICE
FOR THE COURT

APPENDIX B

Commission on Children's Justice Organizational Chart

Commission Co-Chairs	Judge Rhea Sheldon Judge Thomas Broome Justice Dawn Beam
Focus Areas and Subcommittees	Court Improvement Grant Distribution Parent Representation MS Programs of HOPE
Commission Membership	
Judge Latrice Westbrooks Randy G. Pierce David Calder Shirley Kennedy Dr. Scott Benton Dr. Beverly Bryant Angela Robertson Dr. Lisa Nored Paula Broome Craig Robertson Amy Wilson Bob Anderson Taylor Cheeseman Lyndsy Irwin Judge Sharon Sigalas Judge Vel Young-Graham Chancellor Jacqueline Mask Judge Kevin Briscoe Judge Holly Denson Karla Tye Devon Loggins John Damon Nicole McLaughlin Andre DeGruy Judge John Hudson	Mississippi Court of Appeals Mississippi Judicial College University of Mississippi School of Law Mississippi College School of Law University of Mississippi Medical Center University of Mississippi Medical Center Mississippi State University University of Southern Mississippi Mississippi Office of Attorney General 200 Million Flowers CASA Mississippi Mississippi Department of Human Services Department of Child Protection Services Mississippi Department of Human Services Jackson County Youth Court Lauderdale County Youth Court First Chancery District of Mississippi Chief Justice, Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians Mississippi Children's Advocacy Centers Mississippi United Methodist Children's Homes Canopy Children's Solutions Access to Justice Commission Office of the State Public Defender Jurist-in-Residence, Mississippi Supreme Court